

Panel Votes to Ban Women From Combat

Army Leaders Strongly Oppose House Subcommittee's Action

By Ann Scott Tyson
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Brushing aside opposition from top Army leaders, a House subcommittee approved a measure yesterday that would ban women from serving in certain support units in a bid to keep them out of "direct ground combat."

The vote is likely to escalate a political debate that has simmered in Washington since last fall over the role of women in war zones, as the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have engaged women in battle and killed and wounded female soldiers.

The legislation, backed by House Armed Services Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.), would require the Army to prohibit women from serving in any company-size unit that provides support to combat battalions or their subordinate companies. While not retroactive, the measure, if enacted, would block the assignment of women to thousands of positions that are now open to them, a committee staff member said.

"The American people have never wanted to have women in combat and this reaffirms that policy," Hunter said in a statement.

Army leaders strongly criticized the legislation in letters to Congress yesterday, saying women are performing "magnificently" in a wide range of units, working where battlefields have no clear front lines.

"The proposed amendment will cause confusion in the ranks, and will send the wrong signal to the brave young men and women fighting the Global War on Terrorism," Gen. Richard A. Cody, the Army's vice chief of staff, wrote in a letter delivered to the House yesterday. "This is not the time to create such confusion."

He said that the Army is in "strict and full compliance with Department of Defense policies regarding women in combat," but that it continues to "study" the role of women in light of an ongoing reorganization of Army units and the complex, changing nature of warfare. Cody wrote that Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, the Army chief of staff, concurred with the letter, an identical version of which was sent to the House by Army Secretary Francis J. Harvey.

The legislation, an amendment to the 2006 defense authorization bill, was introduced with little advance notice yesterday after Hunter advised the Military Personnel subcommittee late Tuesday night to vote on it, congressional staff members said. It passed 9 to 7 along party lines.

The latest debate over women in combat was kindled by an Army reorganization started last year, which created new mixed-sex "forward support companies." The companies were designed to be located together with combat battalions so they could provide them directly with supplies, maintenance and other support. Critics of the change, however, including some congressional

Republicans, said it violates a 1994 Pentagon prohibition on women in units that "physically collocate and remain with direct ground combat units."

The Army said it has adjusted its organization to comply with the policy on women.

Subcommittee Chairman John M. McHugh (R-N.Y.) said the legislation is aimed at enforcing a "no women in combat" policy, and denied it is a "Neanderthal initiative to keep women out of the Army."

Democrats on the subcommittee, however, criticized the amendment as unfair to women and warned that it could worsen recruitment a time when the Army is failing to meet enlistment goals.

"You are sending a message that women can't do this job," said Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.). Rep. Susan Davis (D-Calif.) asked, "Can we really afford to toss out 20 percent or more of the individuals who are serving so capably in these units?"

Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.) said the legislation amounted to "discrimination" barring women from "serving in the battlefield."

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